

# Where did Hoosier come from New bill seeks to answer question for good

By Whitney Downard | Indiana Capital Chronicle • Indianapolis  
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Prescott



Refer to someone from Indiana as an “Indianan” and your ignorance might invoke an eye roll or a glare, but — if you’re really lucky — you’ll get a comedic interruption of an 1800s-era Indiana settler who’s just heard a knock at the door.

This is the land of Hoosiers, after all.

But there’s little consensus on the meaning of the demonym, a noun used to denote natives or inhabitants of a particular area.

To clear the record, state Rep. J.D. Prescott, R-Union City, has led House Bill 1143 to establish “The Hoosier State” as Indiana’s official nickname.

That part is pretty simple, but the bill also would put into state law the origin of the Hoosier terminology — and it’s a story that many Hoosiers today may have never heard before.

Who is Harry Hoosier?

Prescott’s bill declares that Harry Hoosier is the namesake of the state. He was born into slavery before becoming a Methodist minister in the 1770s, the bill says.

Harry Hoosier was also known by the names Harry Hosier, Harry Hosher, and Harry Hossier and the consensus of modern historians is that each variant of his last name was pronounced “Hoosier.”

Harry Hoosier preached to black and white congregations and was a highly respected preacher and orator despite being illiterate.

The bill contends that “new Methodist believers who identified with the ministry of Harry Hoosier became known as Hoosiers” and that “many of Harry Hoosier’s faithful followers brought their Methodist beliefs and Hoosier nickname to Indiana in the decades before and after Indiana was granted statehood in 1816.”

Prescott told the Indiana Capital Chronicle he first learned about Harry Hoosier in elementary school. The legislator said he’s since become intrigued by the story, and claims his own personal research “really just points to Harry Hoosier as how we’ve come to be identified as Hoosiers in Indiana.”

“He traveled the country, teaching the gospel. Most of his teachings were in what is known today as Indiana and parts of Ohio,” he said. “During that time period, he was known not just as one of the best beat preachers and one of the best public speakers of his time. I just think it’s important that we honor Harry Hoosier and officially designate Indiana as the Hoosier State.”

A January 2022 Christian Heritage Fellowship article claims Harry Hoosier’s story is the “most plausible explanation for the origin of Indiana’s nickname.

### Other Hoosier theories

The problem is, the origin of Hoosier has long been debated. The Indiana Historical Bureau has a post on the theories and findings.

“As soon as our nickname came into general use, speculation began as to its origin,” the bureau says. Distinguished Hoosier writer Meredith Nicholson and many others have inquired into the origin of Hoosier.

She observed: “The origin of the term ‘Hoosier’ is not known with certainty. But certain it is that ... Hoosiers bear their nickname proudly. Many generations of Hoosier achievement have endowed the term with connotations that are strong and friendly.”

Ray Boomhower, senior editor of the Indiana Historical Society Press, points to late Indiana historian Jacob Piatt Dunn Jr.'s lengthy research into the history of the word.

Dunn found out that Hoosier was used frequently in the South in the 19th Century to refer to woodsmen or rough hill people, Boomhower writes. The word was then traced back to "hoozer," a term from the Cumberland dialect of England that meant anything unusually large, like a hill. Dunn noted that descendants of English immigrants brought the name with them when they settled in the hill country of southern Indiana.